

Agatha Raisin

Hell's Bells

A
not so
merry
DING-DONG!

M.C. Beaton

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

M. C. Beaton is the author of the hugely successful Agatha Raisin and Hamish Macbeth series, as well as a quartet of Edwardian murder mysteries featuring heroine Lady Rose Summer, several Regency romance series and a stand-alone murder mystery, *The Skeleton in the Closet* – all published by Constable & Robinson. She left a full-time career in journalism to turn to writing, and now divides her time between the Cotswolds and Paris. Visit www.mcbeatonbooks.co.uk for more, or follow M. C. Beaton on Twitter: @mc_beaton.

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(listed in order)

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Agatha Raisin and the Potted Gardener
Agatha Raisin and the Walkers of Dembley
Agatha Raisin and the Murderous Marriage
Agatha Raisin and the Terrible Tourist
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The Agatha Raisin Companion

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HELL'S BELLS

By

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Mary Bolton, a widow, who lived in the Cotswold village of Weston Magna, considered herself to be the beating, generous heart of the village. She was a great manager. She ran charity boot car sales, dances at the bowling club, read to the elderly and any other do-good thing she could think of.

Although in her late forties, she considered herself – like Miss Jean Brodie – to be in her prime. She had curly brown hair, a figure rigorously trimmed with a body stocking, and a wide mouth that always seemed to be smiling. The smile, however, did not reach her rather prominent pale grey eyes.

She was delighted when a wealthy farmer died and left money to re-hang the bells in the church. Only the tenor bell had been fit for ringing for over twenty years.

Mary threw herself into the study of campanology, dragging along with her five other villagers, to the nearby village of Ancombe for lessons in bell ringing.

Then when the bells of St. Edmund's in Weston Magna was been re-hung, they gathered in the bell tower and sent the brazen clamour of the bells sounding out over the countryside as Mary called for rehearsal after rehearsal.

Jessica Brand, a former Olympic swimmer, whose cottage lay in the shadow of the bell tower, thought she would be driven mad by the hellish sound. She was a tall, muscular woman with big hands and feet. It was believed she was about the same age as Mary.

Jessica confronted Mary in the village store one morning. "You've got to confine that bell ringing to Sundays only, d'you hear?"

"But we must practice," protested Mary with that turnip lantern smile of hers. "As soon as we have reached perfection, we will rehearse on Thursday evenings and then Sundays."

"And how long is that going to take?" demanded Jessica threateningly, looming over Mary.

"Oh, a month or two."

"A month or.... Listen you," said Jessica. "That damned cacophony is driving me mad. Go on the way you're going and I'll throttle you and hang you from your damned bell rope."

But the noise went on. In vain did Jessica protest to the vicar and then to the parish council. Powerful woman though she was, everyone was more frightened of Mary than they were of Jessica. Mary had sneaky ways of getting her own back if anyone crossed her. Hadn't Mrs. Bryce, who had won the jam making competition for years, been foolish enough to vote Mary off the sale of work committee? Mary put it about that Mrs. Bryce was putting in

shop bought jam. This proved to be the case. Mrs. Bryce wept and said someone had deliberately substituted the shop jam for her own, but she lost the prize for the first time in ten years. Only Jessica had been bold enough to suggest that Mary had made the substitution.

At long last, the bell ringing rehearsal was confined to Thursday evenings. Jessica once more found life bearable. The first Thursdays' rehearsal, she took herself off for dinner with friends, returning late when she was sure the bell ringing was over.

She was just settling down with a nightcap, when she heard it – the deep-throated boom of one of the large bells. The sound reverberated through her small sitting room.

Jessica strode out of her cottage and marched to the bell tower. She thrust opened the door, and then screamed.

For swinging towards her with a bell rope wrapped around her neck, her eyes bulging in her purple contorted face, came Mary Bolton.

Jessica seized the body and stopped its swing. Far above, the bell gave one last mocking boom and then there was silence.

Two days' later, private detective, Agatha Raisin, and Jessica Brand, faced each other in Agatha's office in the town of Mircester. Jessica looked doubtfully at Agatha. She saw a woman with glossy brown hair, a round face and bearlike eyes, wearing, in her opinion, too short a skirt.

"So you think you are going to be accused of murder?" said Agatha.

"I was heard threatening to strangle her," said Jessica miserably.

"Evidently someone had strangled her and then strung her up."

"Do you know of anyone who hated her enough?" asked Agatha.

"She was by way of being a managing bully, but no one really stood up to her."

"Well, tell me all you know about her." While Jessica talked, Agatha took notes.

When Jessica had finished, Agatha said, "I'll do my best. Leave it with me."

After Jessica had left, Agatha sat, deep in thought. What were the usual reasons for murder? Sex and money. So who inherited? She asked one of her detectives, Patrick Mulligan, who had contacts with the police, to find out if Mary had made a will.

The next day, Patrick had the news. "It's an old will," he said. "She left everything to her husband."

"That's no good," said Agatha. "He's dead. Jessica said she was a widow."

"No, she was posing as a widow. They were divorced four years ago. He was paying alimony. His name is John Brand. He owns the Gloucester deli in Mircester."

Agatha sat outside the deli until closing time. Patrick had given her a photograph of John Brand so she recognised him when he came out. He was followed by a pretty young blonde. He was a squat florid man in his fifties. The blonde looked as if she were not long out of her teens. He looked around and gave the blonde a hurried kiss. Agatha got out of her car and sent off in pursuit of the blonde.

She caught up with her in a quiet street near the abbey. "Excuse me," said Agatha. "Do you know that John Brand is shortly going to be arrested for the murder of his ex wife?" Agatha's methods were often the despair of the police.

The girl turned white. "Who are you?" demanded Agatha.

"Are you the police?"

"I am in plain clothes," said Agatha jesuitically.

"I'm Tracey Forest. I ain't had nuffink to do with it. He said the old crow was bleeding him dry. He hated her. He said he had to kill her."

"Wait there, I'm calling the police," said Agatha.

"I thought you was the police," wailed Tracey.

"Sort of," said Agatha.

"Do you have to arrest him? He was going to take me to Paris."

Agatha sat drinking coffee with Jessica a week after the arrest of John Brand. The bells pounded out for the funeral of Mary.

"Hellish noise," shouted Agatha.

Jessica grinned.

"Music to my ears, Agatha."

THE END

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